

Evaluating a Risk Assessment

Risk assessment is a decision-support process to help juvenile justice systems identify the system-involved youth on whom they should focus—youth who are most likely to later reenter the system.¹ Risk assessment instruments must be evaluated against certain criteria to ensure they function appropriately and that decision makers are likely to “get it right.” These criteria include distribution, accuracy, reliability, equity, utility, and continuous quality improvement (CQI).

Distribution shows the number of youth across groups in each risk-level category. The risk distribution should be reasonable as it relates to practice, such as available services or system improvement goals.

Accuracy refers to how accurately the risk assessment differentiates groups of youth by their likelihood of subsequent recurrence.

Reliability indicates how often different people using the same information and the same tool come up with the same answer. In this sense, a tool can be reliable if everyone got the same answer, even if they all got the same wrong answer.





Equity ensures that risk level means the same thing for everyone, regardless of differences in race/ethnicity, gender, or geography. Outcome rates by risk level should be similar across subgroups.

Utility refers to the usability of the instrument. It helps determine the degree to which policy and practice are commensurate and that the instrument provides answers to the appropriate questions.

CQI is any ongoing monitoring of how the assessment is working and being completed, along with other methods of ongoing quality improvement, to classify youth according to their overall likelihood of future offending. To be most effective, risk assessment validity should be examined regularly with local data. Risk levels are typically placed along the upper axis of the matrix.

Each key criterion is rated using the scale below. “Revisions” refers to the risk assessment instrument or process. Any category with a red light should be an immediate priority.

Recommendations to revise should be addressed before moving on to disposition matrix construction.

Rating Scale	
Green Light No revisions recommended	
Yellow Light Moderate revisions recommended	
Red Light Major revisions recommended	
Caution Sign Unknown	

¹Reentry refers to a youth’s return to the juvenile justice system, such as at intake.